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van Rees, C.J.; Vermunt, J.K.

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## POETICS

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# Event history analysis of authors' reputation: Effects of critics' attention on debutants' careers ☆

Kees van Rees <sup>a,\*</sup>, Jeroen Vermunt <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Language and Literature, Tilburg University, P.O. Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Sociology, Tilburg University, P.O. Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands*

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### Abstract

A quantitative analysis was performed on Dutch authors' data derived from a survey of the critical reception of eighteen writers of fiction who made their debut around 1975. Changes in the amount of critical attention between first and subsequent titles of 18 Dutch authors were analysed by means of discrete-time event history models. The dependent variable 'attention' was operationalized as the number of reviews in top periodicals that a title received. The rank number of the title was used as the (discrete) time dimension.

First, we performed a descriptive analysis without covariates to get an impression of the difference in the amount of attention between first and subsequent titles, that is, to determine how strongly attention at  $T = t + 1$  depends on attention at  $T = t$ .

The regression model used was a discrete-time logit model in which 'decrease in the number of reviews' and 'increase in the number of reviews' were treated as competing risks. The (time-varying) covariates used, apart from the 'time' variable, were the mean judgement of the previous title and the status of the publisher of the current title. Although all parameter estimates had the expected signs, only the effect of judgement on 'increase' and the effect of time on 'decrease' were significant. This is probably the result of the small sample size (18 cases, 68 person-periods).

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\* Corresponding author. E-mail: c.j.vrees@kub.nl; Tel.: +31 13 466 2666; Fax: +31 13 466 3110.

## 1. Introduction

Reputation and success are unequally distributed among artists, particularly fiction writers. Recent research in the sociology of literature (Janssen, 1994) has shown that institutional resources and constraints such as the amount of attention reviewers give a debutant's work and the stature of his/her publisher affect reviewers' selection of later titles by the same author for their reviews. To gain a reputation, an author's work must receive continuous attention from authoritative reviewers and critics. Authors of literary fiction who fail to attract the attention of reviewers are not likely to gain a literary reputation and their work is at risk of falling into oblivion within a short time. A book's material production must have a positive sequel in the process of symbolic production.

Previous research has shown that attention from reviewers and acquired readership affect book buyers' demand for a new title (Verdaasdonk, 1987) and, secondly, that the number of reviews a new title receives depends on the size of the publishing house and 'previous attention', that is, the amount of attention given a previous title (Janssen, 1994: 61ff.). In the present study reviewers' attention was the dependent variable. We endorse the view that 'publisher's status' and 'previous attention' represent important explanatory variables. The use of multiple regression analyses made it possible to come up with valid results on the impact of these variables. The present study differs from the previous research just mentioned in that we took into account the time-varying nature of the independent variables.

One of the purposes of this study was to improve our knowledge of the relationship of the processes of material and symbolic production of cultural goods. In dealing with this topic, we focused on a limited area of the cultural field, namely, the literary field; more specifically, we addressed the issue of what factors influence the amount of critical attention that new fiction titles receive. Besides adding to current theoretical knowledge, our aim was to illustrate the applicability of event history analysis – a methodology for the analysis of longitudinal data current in many other areas of sociological research – to research in the sociology of culture. Different kinds of cultural products can be said to have a life cycle of their own; over time they may be subject to an increase or a decrease in reputation. Event history analysis is a technique that makes it possible to model such dynamic processes. Humanistic research on canon formation usually pays a great deal of attention to authors who have earned a big reputation. In order to trace the factors underlying a writer's success, it is important to contrast successful writers in one and the same analysis with authors' careers that are less successful.

Section 2 is an outline of the theoretical background required for an analysis and understanding of the role of criticism. Criticism is presented as one of the institutions in the cultural field that play a major role in the assignment of quality to both cultural products and their material producers. The section also includes a brief sketch of how critics select new works for discussion and assess their value.

A data set on the titles of 18 debutant Dutch authors whose work appeared over the period 1975–1991 can be found in section 3. The section focuses on how to measure and weigh critical attention.

In section 4 we report on the event history analysis performed on the data presented

in section 3. A discrete-time event history model was applied to explain changes in attention between titles.

A discussion and a number of concluding remarks are presented in section 5.

## 2. The literary field

From sociological research by Bourdieu and others, it appears that a work of art is the product of a vast operation of 'social alchemy' jointly conducted by all the agents involved in the cultural field (cf. Bourdieu, 1977, 1983). Here, the 'cultural field' must be understood to mean the set of institutions or collections of agents performing specific tasks in the production, distribution, and promotion of symbolic goods. Areas of culture and art vary according to the degree of legitimacy each has obtained at a given moment. And the more legitimate a field, the more developed will be the division of labor and, consequently, the greater the number and kinds of institutions involved in the material and symbolic production. Among the characteristics these different areas have in common, two of the most important are (i) the interdependence of these processes of material and symbolic production (Bourdieu, 1983; De Nooy, 1991: 513–516) and (ii) the similarity of the institutions involved.

A subfield of the cultural field, namely the literary field, constitutes the focus of interest of the interdisciplinary group of researchers at Tilburg University. The *literary field* is the set of literary institutions (see Fig. 1). This set includes the organisations involved in the material production and distribution of books (publishing houses, public libraries, booksellers and book clubs). In most countries with a sizable book market, literary agents function as brokers of new manuscripts. In the Netherlands, the Writers' Union, one of the organisations in the book trade mentioned in Fig. 1, appears to fulfill this role, for instance, by establishing standard contracts. One of the functions of cultural councils is to advise national and local authorities on public subsidies for the arts. These councils rely on the peer judgement given directly in the council's committees, and indirectly on previous reviewers' judgements. Lastly, there is the somewhat loosely organised group of people who are most directly involved in the process of symbolic production: critics and teachers of literature who seek to specify and propagate conceptions of literature. These two groups employ specific channels of communication (literary education, scholarly and literary magazines, press, media).

In the model of the literary field sketched in Fig. 1, 'readers' and 'non-readers' are expressly included, not as institutions of course, but as categories of agents whose cultural behavior – for example, reading – depends to an important extent on their knowledge of or acquaintance with views developed and propagated by critics and by teachers of literature. As pointed out by Bourdieu (1983: 327), producers and products can be distinguished according to their degree of success with certain kinds of audience; for instance, economic success with a general audience which lacks the power to consecrate can be contrasted with the esteem of an elite audience of connoisseurs who, at least within their 'subfield of production-for-producers', are themselves in the position to attribute value to products and producers of cultural goods.

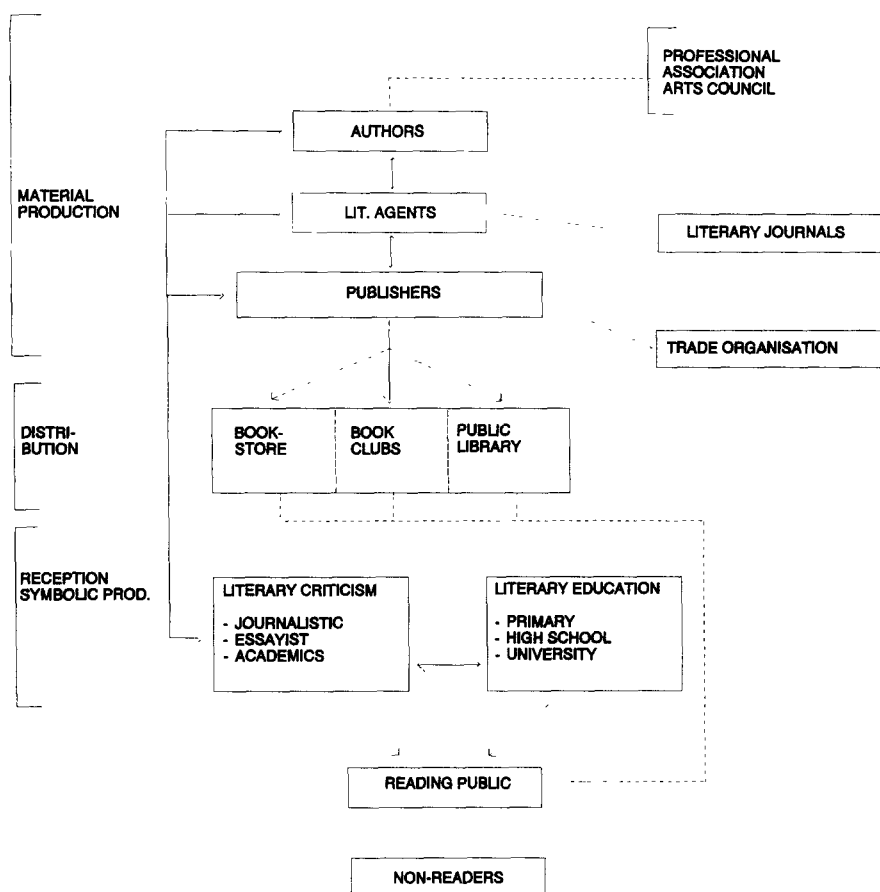


Fig. 1. Scheme of the literary field.

The literary field embodies a varied network of relations. Members of different institutions engage in specific professional activities with respect to literary texts. These activities are shaped by the institutional framework. Therefore, to gain insight into an agent's functioning and its effects one must take into account the rules and conventions governing both the institution to which s/he belongs and its relations with the other institutions in the field<sup>1</sup>. Researchers focusing on the literary field should take a position outside of the field; they should make a special effort to analyze the activities of literary institutions from a meta-level viewpoint. By examining the operation of literary institutions in this way, relevant questions can be raised about the extent to which activities by members of different institutions interact; about the effects of these activities, specifically about the way economic, social and ideological factors together affect not only the nature of these institutions' products (publishers' lists, literary magazines, the assortment offered by book clubs, the collections of public libraries and

<sup>1</sup> Although the paper's focus is on *literary* writers and critics, we contend that the gist of our argument also holds for other types of art.

writers' reputations), but also cultural consumers' choices and reading behavior. The metaposition requires that researchers refrain from interpreting literary texts and expressing value judgements on them. For participants in the literary field, especially for critics and scholars in the humanities, this is entirely alien to their habitus and practice. In adopting a metaposition, researchers are not, however, prohibited from discussing the contents of statements of any form made by participants within the literary field. On the contrary, to adequately deal with a topic like reputation formation it may prove of great importance that reviewers' statements, for instance, be *constructed* into empirical data that can be used to test hypotheses specified in the theoretical model and bearing, for instance, on how reviewers reach consensus on the quality of cultural products (Van Rees, 1987; De Nooy, 1991).

### 2.1. *What kind of job does criticism perform?*

When a participant in the literary field affirms that 'a certain text has value' ('is good' or any variant), such a phrase must, at a meta-level, be understood to mean 'its being awarded value by qualified agents'. The specific nature which is assigned to literature results from a complex interplay of factors pertaining to the processes of production, distribution and acquisition (even consumption) of literature. Attributing aesthetic (literary) value to a text means considering it as a legitimate form of art. The assessment of aesthetic legitimacy – a mode of symbolic production – is the privilege of a small number of cultural (literary) institutions, criticism having a predominant role.

Criticism plays such a significant part because critics are professionally involved in ascribing properties and value to literary works, and thus influence each of three areas – production, distribution, and consumption of literature. First, criticism is itself a mode of reception (consumption) of literature. Reviews are an important source of information not only for the reading public but also for professional readers at literary publishing houses who have to advise about new manuscripts. In several respects, time is an important factor in authors' and publishers' increasing or decreasing in reputation. Variation in authors' productivity – the pace at which they produce new manuscripts intended for publication – is due not only to variation in individual talent but also to the amount of encouragement publishers give. The latter is affected by the amount of attention reviewers gave a previous title. Conversely, publishers' products, that is, backlists of varying reputation, steer critics in selecting or rejecting titles for a review (see below). Second, the critic's discourse affects the distribution of literary texts by way of the bookselling trade and public libraries. Booksellers and those who select books for public libraries can assess the saleability or lendability of a new title partly on the basis of the interest literary critics – besides buyers and borrowers – displayed in earlier works by the same author. Last but not least, discussions that art critics and connoisseurs devote to cultural goods, mostly in interaction with their makers, contribute to their legitimation as works of art.

Art connoisseurs and critics are authorized to make pronouncements on the artistic qualities of the works under discussion, thus designating these works as works of art of a certain rank. While, from an epistemological viewpoint, the critical assessment of literary works is a shaky undertaking (see section 2.2), it cannot be overemphasized that the main responsibility for the constitution of the repertory and for the ranking process

rests with reviewers and critics. The attribution of properties and value by authoritative members of the institution of criticism proves to be socially effective as other reviewers and critics – and even the writer of the work under discussion – appear inclined to reproduce their views. In order to be regarded in the long run as high quality – and to be included in the so-called literary *canon*<sup>2</sup> – a text must pass through the selection filters of three distinct types of critics: journalistic reviewers, essayists, and academic critics. Differences between them pertain to their different temporal positions with respect to literary texts and to the vastness of the selection made from literary works of this century or earlier periods. The predominantly positive interest of reviewers in certain literary works appears to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the activities of essayists relating to these works. The same holds true of the later inclusion of these works in the repertory of academic criticism: literary works that pass unnoticed by contemporary reviewers or essayists have little chance of nevertheless becoming the subject of academic criticism.

## 2.2. *How do critics make their selection and assign quality?*

The initial (and partial) answer to the ‘How’ question must be negatively formulated: in assigning quality, critics *lack* an instrument to measure a work’s quality in an intersubjective and reliable way. Contrary to critics’ claims, the grading process to which a text is subjected is not founded on any specific insight enabling a critic to recognize intrinsic textual properties that would justify its classification as a literary text of a certain standard. This by no means prevents critics from performing their threefold task of describing, interpreting, and evaluating these works. Nor does it prevent them from reaching consensus as to which products publishers have brought on the market deserve their attention and how to express this attention.

In performing these tasks, reviewers and critics resort to a conception of literature. The term ‘conception of literature’ (CL) must be understood to mean a set of *normative* views on the nature and function of literature (or art), along with a set of definitions of techniques applied by writers. Such a set cannot generally be conceived of as highly systematized. Yet, the history of criticism shows several attempts at systematization in the form of poetical treatises and the like<sup>3</sup>. The normative views peculiar to a CL

<sup>2</sup> Actually, ‘canon’ is not a term derived from the metalanguage of the empirically oriented researcher, but rather a criterion term from the object language of agents active within the literary field. Different groups of experts (critics or teachers of literature) use the multidimensional notion of canon to refer to quite different sets of works: ‘world literature’, ‘English poetry from the 17th century’, the school canon of works every college student should have read, etc.

<sup>3</sup> The rather unsystematic and often speculative nature of ideas contained in CLs renders it difficult to clearly distinguish between various CLs. Again, what elements from CLs empirically oriented researchers wish to use (and the issue of how they use them) depends on one’s research questions. No general rules for reconstructing a CL as a coherent set of statements on the nature and function of literature can be stated as the specific research questions have to be taken into account. The Dutch Science Organization recently started a Humanities research programme entitled ‘The impact of using conceptions of literature on quality assignment in the literary field’ (Van Rees and Dorleijn, 1994; Dorleijn and van Rees, 1995). Several projects address the issue of how, from a synchronic or diachronic viewpoint, components of conceptions of literature (its core and its prototypical traits) might be constructed into data permitting to answer precise research questions on the material and symbolic production processes in Classical, English, French, German, and Dutch literature.

change as time goes on. Mostly these changes are gradual and piecemeal, hardly affecting what might be regarded as a CL's core. An important function of a CL is to provide professional judges with a means of standardizing their response to works of art. In a diluted form, the views peculiar to current CLs are spread through the teaching of literature. The impact of CLs on literary education deserves closer scrutiny on the part of empirically oriented researchers.

Critics imply that certain techniques are responsible for the specific properties they attribute to a work of art and for the reader's 'aesthetic experience'. However, critical notions contained in a CL are not well defined. A CL fails to provide the criteria indispensable to a uniform and reliable application of the definitions it embodies. With respect to the use of these equivocal notions – in a review, study, preface to an anthology, etc. – this prevents readers from deciding whether or not a textual property that is postulated by critics or members of a literary movement can effectively be ascribed to the text under discussion. Many of the ideas derived from a CL are used by postulate, that is, as a tenet that need not be questioned, or even may not be questioned under penalty of exclusion from the discussion.

The agreement among critics about the relevance of arguments put forth in critical studies or reviews is partly due to the existence of a CL to which they have committed themselves. For members of a consensus group, neither the body of works of art deemed important nor the legitimate way of formulating statements about them is firmly established. Both are continuously open to modifications. The degree of variability is, however, subject to institutionally determined restrictions. In discussing works of fiction, reviewers may at first resort to quite different conceptions of literature; this lack of initial agreement does not prevent them from gradually reaching consensus about the nature and value of any particular work. Disagreement among critics about whether certain critical arguments should be preferred to others cannot be eliminated by rational discussion. The allegedly literary grounds on which a group of critics claims to do justice to a work as a piece of literature are merely the result of their arbitrary decision to call 'genuinely literary' certain normative tenets they derive from their own CL. The greater an author's reputation and the larger the number of critics who agree about the nature of his work, the more reason dissidents will have either to cease discussing it or to jump on the bandwagon.

### 3. Measuring reviewers' attention

At Tilburg University we have at our disposal a review data base consisting of all the reviews that appeared in the Dutch press (dailies and weeklies) in the period 1975–1981. This 'KUB data base' contains over 20,000 cases. The data definition for a review consists of, among other things, the following attributes: a number of string variables (title of the book reviewed, author, name of reviewer, name of publisher), date of publication (book and review), number of words in the review, title and kind of newspaper. In addition, Susanne Janssen recorded data on all works of fiction and on the critical reception of these titles for the years 1978 and 1991 (cf. Janssen, 1994). This facilitated the construction of indicators to determine the weight of publishers and the importance of dailies and weeklies as a review medium.



Critics' interest in the book supply is highly selective. Every new title is, in principle, a candidate for a reviewer's attention. Evidently, the latter is limited in range. Besides space limitations in periodicals, there are limits on the time a reviewer has to spend on reading and commenting on new works. Even a regular critic who is writing on a weekly basis has to make a selection from the book supply; with respect to authors he has followed over a long period, a critic's motivation, e.g., to review the umpteenth title and to find a new formula for his previous value judgement, can wear thin. As Janssen's research shows, the distribution of critical attention is extremely skewed. Nowadays, more than 50% of new Dutch literary fiction titles receive no reviewer's attention at all. In 1978, 50% of all reviews were devoted to only 10% of the fiction titles published that year. In 1991, the distribution was even more skewed as 10% of the book titles accounted for more than 60% of the reviews (Janssen, 1994: 53).

In selecting a work for review, critics draw 'inspiration' from a number of attributes that are for the most part external to the book in question, but appear related to its institutional setting. Most of the texts reviewers discuss originate from a publishing firm whose output usually attracts their attention. Publishers differ *inter alia* in reputation according to their history (backlist), their size (the annual number of new titles and of reprints) and the extent to which they specialize in literary fiction. (As indicated, the amount of attention for a title on the part of both reviewers and the reading public can explain a publisher's varying willingness to publish new work by a 'productive' author.)

Publishers were categorized according to their size and their predominant output (big/medium/small, literary vs. non-literary).<sup>4</sup> Initially we followed Janssen (1994) in distinguishing five kinds of publishing house: (1) big literary; (2) big non-literary; (3) medium literary; (4) medium non-literary; (5) small (literary or non-literary). In the case of a debutant, the type of publishing firm is more or less a deciding factor in whether or not a work will be reviewed. In the case of non-debutant authors, it is critical attention for previous work and the type of the publishing firm which jointly account for 71% of 230 titles' variation in critical attention (Janssen, 1994: 59ff.).<sup>5</sup> For a debutant published by a small publishing house, attention in top periodicals increases the chance of his/her signing a contract with a publisher in a higher category.

To gain insight into the effects of critical attention, it is necessary to be more specific about how to measure critical attention. It is not the sheer number of reviews that counts. Since a process of reproduction is at work among critics as well as other agents in the literary field, one must develop other indicators that take this process into account and help to categorize reviews according to the influence they have on a writer's career. The question then is what categories are relevant. One must devise means to categorize reviews according to the influence they have on a writer's career. A reviewer has an

<sup>4</sup> The Dutch Uniform Genre Classification is a coding system the publisher uses to categorize each of his publications before sending them to the legal depot at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (Royal Library). Separate doces are available, *inter alia*, for literary and non-literary genres.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, other indicators may also be of significance, notably the literary magazine(s) in which previous work appeared; his/her performance as reviewer or essayist, board member in professional organizations, or performances during writers' festivals (cf. Janssen, 1994: 90–99).

interest in seeing his reviews published by one of the chief review media of a country.<sup>6</sup> Attention from reviewers in major periodicals, together with the length of the review and mean value judgement, are hypothesized to be better predictors of both the remaining reviewers' reproductive discourse on the title reviewed and of the attention for subsequent titles. In using the number of reviews in top periodicals as the measure for the amount of attention, we expressly ignore the regional press. Though reviews in the regional press may affect its readership, it is for the most part reproductive in nature, that is, it follows the evaluation of reviewers in top periodicals.

Periodicals were categorized according to the number of reviews on fiction (literary and nonliterary alike) each had published in the years 1978 and 1991. A distinction was made between top periodicals (dailies and weeklies having published > 38 reviews with a mean number of > 500 words per review) and the remaining dailies and weeklies (< 38 reviews per year). The top periodicals not only cover more titles, with lengthier reviews, but they are also more prompt in their response to new titles. It is no coincidence that the top periodicals are known to have the readership with the highest level of education and the highest grade of participation in the more legitimate forms of 'high' culture; they are distributed nation-wide.

From a list of debutant writers in all genres in the period 1970–1980, a sample of eighteen authors was selected according to the following criteria: year of debut (1975 to 1977), genre of debut (narrative prose). Thus, with the KUB data base as the starting-point, a *debutant review file* was created, consisting of some 1100 cases. Each case refers to review data on one of the ninety titles the eighteen authors produced over a period of 12 to 15 years (1975–1991).<sup>7</sup> This debutant file contains a number of new variables. A value judgement was scored for each review on a five-point scale (ranging from 'very negative' to 'very positive'). In addition, the data files for 1978 and 1991 provided a criterion to reliably assess the stature of both the publisher and the periodical on an ordinal scale over the period 1975 to 1991. Thereby, data on 1978 were taken as a guideline for the period until 1985, while data from 1991 functioned as anchor point for the scoring of periodical importance and publisher's kind after 1985. Reviews on a title were also differentiated according to whether those in top periodicals preceded those in the remaining periodicals or the other way round.

<sup>6</sup> A critic's relative weight and the degree of authority of his review medium appear to be strongly associated. This relation is a dynamic one; it is in a continuous state of flux. When a novice reviewer moves from an insignificant regional journal to an authoritative weekly, part of this authority reflects on him. When an acknowledged critic becomes one of the review editors of a rather colorless medium, the latter will gain by it. For the present purpose, we have disregarded individual critics and their stature. It will be taken into account when individual reviews are subjected to content analysis with a view to determining what kind of critical ideas are thought to 'adequately' characterize the work in question and who may be held responsible for this consensus formation.

<sup>7</sup> The data bear on the Dutch literary field which much resembles the situation in Western Europe but is not identical to the one in the US (e.g., literary agents hardly play a role in the Dutch literary field); in analyzing the situation in other countries, one has, of course, to take into account differences in size and organisation of the publishing, the bookselling and the library fraternities as well as differences in the organisation of the review media and in the place allotted to the teaching of literature. We are confident that the methodology applied compensates for the limited universe of discourse from which the sample is taken.

An aggregate file was made containing the following summary measures per title: its chronological place in the writer's body of work, the total number of reviews, the number of reviews in top periodicals, the total and the mean number of words devoted to the title (the mean number also being differentiated for top periodicals and the 'rest'), and, finally, three kinds of mean value judgement (for the total number of reviews, those in top periodicals and those in the rest, respectively). Fourteen of the eighteen debutants were published by big literary publishers. Among these fourteen debutants, five scored rather modestly on top periodical reviews, mean number of words, and value judgement; four of them went over to a publisher of lower rank later on in their career, the remaining one discontinued his career as a writer of fiction immediately after his debut. That four of these authors attracted the attention of at least one reviewer in a top periodical may be due to the publisher's name. The other nine debutants published by the big firms were more successful in attracting reviewers' attention for the gradually increasing number of new titles they wrote.

#### **4. The analysis of the debutants' data**

The previous section presented the debutants' data containing information on the titles of 18 Dutch authors. It discussed the problem of measurement of the amount of critical attention and it presented some of the possible factors determining the amount of attention that a particular title receives. In this section, we formalize some of these hypotheses and test them by means of a discrete-time event history model.

##### *4.1. From data set to testable hypotheses*

A strong point of the data set on the careers of 18 Dutch debutant authors is that it is of a longitudinal nature: for each author, there is information on the reviews of all their titles which appeared during a particular period of time (1975–1991). This means that information is available on the change in attention between subsequent titles. That is the reason that the analysis is focused on explaining differences in changes in attention instead of differences in attention. The question to be answered can be formulated as follows: Which factors determine whether an author experiences an increase, a decrease, or no change in attention between subsequent titles? To be able to answer this question, it is necessary to define the basic time dimension which is used in the analysis, to select the most appropriate measure for the dependent variable amount of critical attention, and to specify the explanatory variables to be used in the model.

The time dimensions that are most frequently used in event history analysis are calendar time, process time and waiting time. In the case of the analysis of changes in attention, these time dimensions can be equated to the year in which a title is published, the time since the start of an author's career, and the time since the previous change in attention, respectively. In the current analysis, however, another time dimension seems to be more appropriate, namely, the rank order of a title. This 'time' variable, the rank order of a title, is denoted by TITL, and a particular title by *t*.

The main reason for using this discrete-time variable is that changes in critical attention can only take place when a new title comes out. It is quite common to use a discrete variable indicating the points in time at which changes may occur when changes can only occur at particular points in time. Moreover, the rank order of the title is a good indicator for the stage of the career of an author, which may be one of the factors determining change in attention. Another example of an event history analysis using qualitative stages as the time dimension rather than a real time variable is Mare's (1994) analysis of dropping out of school, in which school levels serve as categories of the time variables. It should be noted that while in the current analysis the length of the time intervals between subsequent titles is disregarded, in another application of event history analysis, the length of the time intervals between titles can be regarded as the phenomenon to be explained.

When the rank order of a title is treated as the discrete-time dimension, the authors' data can also be seen as discrete-time event history data: for each point in time, that is, for each title, there is information on the dependent and independent variables of interest. Therefore, a discrete-time event history model was used to specify a regression model for changes in attention. As is demonstrated below, in a discrete-time event history model, the probability of experiencing an event at discrete-time points is regressed on a set of covariates. In this case, an event is defined as the change in the amount of attention between subsequent titles.

Besides the choice of the time variable, it has to be decided how to define an event, that is, a change in the value of the dependent variable amount of attention. In the present analysis, the number of reviews in top periodicals was used as the measure for the amount of attention. To make an event history analysis feasible, this dependent variable was collapsed into five categories: 0, 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, and > 6 reviews. These five categories are the states that an author can occupy at each 'point in time'. An event is defined as a transition from one state to another state between subsequent titles, for instance, the transition from one or two reviews of the second title to five or six reviews of the third title. The state that an author occupies at the  $t$ -th 'point in time', that is, at the  $t$ -th title, is denoted by  $R_{TOP}(t)$ .

The independent variables that were used in the analysis are the mean judgement of the previous title ( $JUDG$ ) and the status of the publisher of the current title ( $PUBL$ ), which are both time-varying covariates. Both variables are dichotomized into the levels low (score 0) and high (score 1). For the variable  $JUDG$ , low indicates that the mean judgement is lower than three and high means that it is equal to or higher than three. It should be noted that the mean judgement is obtained from judgements on a five-point scale ranging from one to five. For the variable  $PUBL$ , the value high indicates that the publisher is a big literary publishing house, while low indicates that it is a another type of publishing house.

It was hypothesized that a high judgement of the previous title and a high status of the current publisher would lead to an increase in attention, while a low judgement and a low status of the publisher would lead to a decrease in attention. With respect to the 'time' variable, it was expected that with each successive title, it becomes more difficult to get more attention and easier to get less attention. One might expect a long-term decline in the amount of critical attention simply because the generation of critics

currently writing in the top periodicals have become too used to the novels by a given author whose work has been reviewed already over a long period; these critics may wish to avoid repeating themselves. This does, however, not hold for a few top writers who continue to draw reviewers' attention.

To perform a discrete-time event history analysis, the data have to be organised into a so-called person-period file, that is, a file with the titles as records (Allison, 1982; Yamaguchi, 1991). The 18 authors produced 86 titles, but since the first title cannot be used to model transitions between titles, a file was constructed with 68 records. The number of titles after the debut for each author ranged between 0 and 12.

Using an event history model for analyzing the debutant authors data has a number of important advantages compared to ordinary regression methods (Blossfeld et al., 1989; Yamaguchi, 1991). First, within the event history analysis framework, the fact that we have a different number of titles for each author does not complicate the analysis. It should be noted that since we defined the time variable as the rank order of a title, the length of the observation period in terms of number of titles is not equal for each author. In event history terminology, an observation which lasts a shorter period of time than the longest period of observation is called a censored observation. Besides the possibility of dealing with observations of unequal length, it is straightforward to model the time dependency of the process and to include time-varying covariates in an event history model. This is important in our case because we want to know the effect of the time variable TITL and of the time-varying covariates JUDG and PUBL on the size of the transition probabilities.

The fact that the dependent variable is collapsed into a limited number of categories to make an event history analysis feasible can be seen as a disadvantage of the approach that is chosen here. Although this may lead to some loss of information, modeling transitions among a small number of categories instead of, for instance, differences in the number of reviews between subsequent points in time also has advantages. First, it makes it possible to define relevant states and therefore relevant transitions, while when modeling differences, it is assumed that a particular difference has the same meaning irrespective of the value of  $RTOP(t)$  and  $RTOP(t - 1)$ . A second advantage is that weaker assumptions are made with respect to the measurement level of the indicator number of reviews. Only the information on the ordering of the categories of  $RTOP(t)$  is used in the analysis. So, in fact, the number of reviews is treated as an ordinal level indicator for attention rather than an interval level indicator. This seems to be a plausible assumption, since it is unrealistic to assume that the difference in attention is equal between 0 and 2 reviews and between 10 and 12 reviews.

#### 4.2. *The discrete-time logit model*

In a discrete-time event history model, the transition probability, or the probability of occurrence of an event at a particular point in time, is regressed on one or more time variables and a set of covariates (Allison, 1982, and Yamaguchi, 1991). The transition probabilities will be denoted by  $P[RTOP(t) | RTOP(t - 1)]$ .

An impression of the quantity that is modeled in a discrete-time event history analysis can be gained from Table 1, which includes the mean transition probabilities among the

Table 1  
Mean transitions probabilities

RTOP( <i>t</i> – 1)	RTOP( <i>t</i> )				
	0	1–2	3–4	5–6	> 6
0	0.33	0.50	0.17	0.00	0.00
1–2	0.26	0.52	0.13	0.09	0.00
3–4	0.08	0.25	0.33	0.25	0.08
5–6	0.07	0.20	0.27	0.20	0.27
> 6	0.00	0.17	0.08	0.33	0.42

five different states, that is, the transition probabilities which are obtained when one assumes them to be independent of the rank order of the title and of the two covariates. It can, for instance, be seen that an author with 0 reviews of a particular title has a probability of 0.33 of remaining in that category, a probability of 0.50 of getting 1–2 reviews of the next title, and a probability of 0.17 of seeing the number of reviews increased to 3–4. The fact that  $P[5-6|0]$ ,  $P[>6|0]$ ,  $P[>6|1-2]$ , and  $P[0|>6]$  equal 0.00 indicates that no one improves more than two levels nor deteriorates more than three levels of attention between two titles.

A problem with the transition probabilities appearing in Table 1 is that there are many of them and that each of them is estimated on the basis of a small number of cases: There are 25 different probabilities which are estimated with only 68 cases (person-periods). Clearly, with such a small number of cases it is necessary to specify a model with only a few parameters because otherwise one will never find any significant effect. Since the distinction between increase and decrease is the most interesting one from a substantive point of view, it was decided to distinguish only two types of events in the event history model, namely, a decrease in the amount of attention and an increase in the amount of attention between subsequent titles. This amounts to combining the below diagonal elements of Table 1 for which  $RTOP(t) < RTOP(t - 1)$  in the category 'decrease', the above diagonal elements for which  $RTOP(t) > RTOP(t - 1)$  in the category 'increase', and the diagonal elements for which  $RTOP(t) = RTOP(t - 1)$  into the category 'no event'. Blossfeld et al. (1980) applied a similar definition of events in a model on job changes. They made a distinction between increase and decrease in status when getting a new job.

When there is only one event of interest, a discrete-time history model can be specified by means of a binary logit model (Allison, 1982; Yamaguchi, 1991). The main reason for using a logit transformation of the transition probabilities is that it guarantees that they remain in the allowed interval from 0 to 1. Moreover, standard estimation and testing procedures for logit modeling can be used. In our case there is, however, more than one possible event, which is often referred to as a competing-risk situation (Allison, 1984; Hachen, 1988). As demonstrated by Allison (1982), it is possible to specify models for multiple kinds of events by means of a multinomial logit model. The discrete-time event history model that was used to relate the transition probabilities to TITL, JUDG, and PUBL consists of the following two equations:

$$\log(P^+/P^0) = b^+ + b_{TITL}^+ TITL + b_{JUDG}^+ JUDG + b_{PUBL}^+ PUBL, \quad (1)$$

$$\log(P^-/P^0) = b^- + b_{TITL}^- TITL + b_{JUDG}^- JUDG + b_{PUBL}^- PUBL \quad (2)$$

in which  $P^+$  denotes the probability of an increase,  $P^-$  the probability of a decrease, and  $P^0$  the probability of no change in attention between subsequent titles. In the first equation, the log-odds of an increase in attention rather than no change in attention is related to TITL (the rank order of a title), JUDG (the mean judgement of the previous title), and PUBL (the status of the publisher of the current title). The latter equation relates the log-odds of a decrease in attention rather than no change in attention to TITL, JUDG, and PUBL. In fact, within each level of  $RTOP(t-1)$ ,  $RTOP(t) = RTOP(t-1)$  is used as the reference category for the dependent variable in the logit equations. This is somewhat different from what is done in standard multinomial logit models. Moreover, for the lowest and highest category of  $RTOP(t-1)$ , only one kind of transition is possible, namely, an increase in attention and a decrease in attention, respectively. It should be noted that the two submodels are very parsimonious since they do not contain higher-order interaction terms between TITL, JUDG, and PUBL. As explained above, this was necessary because of the small number of cases which were available to estimate the parameters.

Standard programs for log-linear analysis, such a FREQ (Haberman, 1978) and SPSS-LOGLINEAR can be used to estimate the multinomial logit model described in Eqs. (1) and (2). Our analysis was performed by means of the LEM program (Vermunt, 1993) and another program written by the second author. The main difference between this analysis and a standard logit or log-linear analysis is that here the data consist of person-period records instead of person records. These data are used to compute the five-way frequency table formed by the variables  $RTOP(t)$ ,  $RTOP(t-1)$ , TITL, JUDG, and PUBL, which serves as input for the analysis. It also differs from an ordinary multinomial logit model in that the reference category for the dependent variable depends on the origin state,  $RTOP(t-1)$ . This has to be taken into account when computing the design matrix. As in log-linear analysis, the fit of a model can be tested by means of the Pearson or the likelihood-ratio chi-square statistic.

#### 4.3. Results

The likelihood-ratio chi-square values ( $L^2$ ) and the number of degrees of freedom (df) for the most important models that were estimated are reported in Table 2. First, a model was estimated that contained only the main effects  $b^+$  and  $b^-$  (Model 1). This model has an  $L^2$  value of 170.78 with 214 degrees of freedom. The full model described

Table 2  
Test results for the most important models

Model	$L^2$	df
1. null	170.78	214
2. full	163.19	208
3. only $b_{JUDG}^+$	166.88	213
4. only $b_{TITL}^-$	167.91	213
5. only $b_{JUDG}^+$ and $b_T^-$	163.90	212

Table 3  
Parameter estimates and their t-values for Models 2 and 5

	Model 2		Model 5	
	b	t <sub>b</sub>	b	t <sub>b</sub>
b <sup>+</sup>	–1.49	–2.26	–1.43	–3.76
b <sup>+</sup> <sub>TITL</sub>	–0.06	0.50		
b <sup>+</sup> <sub>JUDG</sub>	1.33	1.80	1.39	2.01
b <sup>+</sup> <sub>PUBL</sub>	0.38	0.55		
b <sup>–</sup>	–0.96	–1.54	–1.14	–2.85
b <sup>–</sup> <sub>TITL</sub>	0.18	1.38	0.21	1.75
b <sup>–</sup> <sub>JUDG</sub>	–0.04	–0.06		
b <sup>–</sup> <sub>PUBL</sub>	–0.17	0.27		

above (Model 2) has an  $L^2$  value of 163.19 with 208 degrees of freedom. Because of the small sample, the absolute values of the chi-square statistic must not be given too much value. Nevertheless, nested models can be tested against each other using differences in  $L^2$  and degrees of freedom. The fact that the  $L^2$  value of Model 2 is only 7.59 lower than that of Model 1 using six additional parameters indicates that some of these effects are not significant.

In order to be able to detect which of the six effects are the most important, the effects were included one by one in the null model. Only the inclusion of  $b_{JUDG}^+$  and  $b_{TITL}^-$  leads to a serious reduction in  $L^2$  compared to Model 1, namely, of 3.90 and 2.97, which is significant on a 0.048 and 0.090 level, respectively (see Models 3 and 4). Thus, it can be concluded that there is a significant effect of JUDG on the probability of an increase and an almost significant linear effect of TITL (rank order of the title) on the probability of a decrease in attention. Model 5, which contains these two effects, has almost the same  $L^2$  as Model 2.

The parameter estimates and their t-values for Models 2 and 5 are presented in Table 3. The reported t-values of the parameters of Model 5 confirm the above test results: When a two-tailed test is performed,  $b_{JUDG}^+$  is significant on a 5 percent level and  $b_{TITL}^-$  on an 8 percent level. However, when a one-tailed test is used, which in this case is more appropriate because directed hypotheses were formulated, the effects are significant on a 2 and 4 percent level, respectively.

For the interpretation of the parameters reported in Table 3, it is important to note that the dichotomous variables judgement (JUDG) and status of the publisher (PUBL) are dummy coded with 'low' as the reference category and that the effect of TITL is a linear effect. The parameter estimates of Model 5 show that there is a slightly lower probability of an increase in attention than of a decrease in attention. Furthermore, a high evaluation of one title increases the probability of the next title receiving more attention. And finally, with each successive title, the probability of a decrease of attention rises.

Although the parameters estimates for the other effects are non-significant, in Model 2, their signs are all in agreement with the hypotheses which were formulated above.



## 5. Discussion and concluding remarks

In the previous section, we showed how to use event history analysis to answer research questions that can be raised in the sociology of culture; in this case, the question related to the factors determining changes in the amount of critical attention that titles receive from reviewers. Although the small number of observations and other limitations of the data set made it necessary to specify a relatively simple discrete-time event history model, it illustrated well the potentials of this technique. Moreover, some interesting substantial results were obtained which were in agreement with the expectations formulated in the theory presented in the preceding sections.

Further research must be based on a greater number of authors and titles (person-period files). It appears that attributes of reviews in top periodicals, such as the number of reviews a debut received in top periodicals, the size of these reviews, the mean value judgement, the time interval between the publication of the book and that of the review are better predictors of attention for a second title than analogous measures based on the sum of all reviews. The same holds for predicting attention for a certain title on the basis of that for a preceding title. It is hypothesized that these attributes are also good predictors of the extent to which debutants managed to obtain subsidies from the Fund for Dutch Literature in the 1980s and won literary prizes that were available during the writer's career.

The relation between critical attention and author's reputation, the topic of this paper, is only one aspect of a larger research project that is devoted to institutional resources and constraints affecting a writer's career. Insofar as criticism is involved, we are aware that both qualitative and quantitative modes of research are needed to specify the factors involved. Therefore, in addition to the kind of quantitative research presented in this article, qualitative modes of analysis should be developed which enable researchers to construct data bearing on the meaning of the writers' and critics' statements and its effect on both the way our society discusses the nature of cultural objects and the selection consumers make from among these objects. Admittedly, only by examining the reviews' contents and the critics' use of conceptions of literature (CL) is one in a position to reconstruct the process of orchestration by which consensus is reached on the nature of a writer's work. What also deserves close scrutiny is a critic's expertise in handling a CL and the extent to which the critical community tends to reproduce the views one or several of its members had about (and often in concert with) a particular writer. Qualitative research of this kind is currently under way. It is an indispensable complement to the more quantitative approach outlined above.

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